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ABSTRACT

School choice legislation initiatives and their impact on school choice at the local level are compared in this survey of over 1,000 superintendents in Minnesota, Iowa, and Arkansas. Provisions of state statutes for school choice implementation in Arkansas, Iowa, Minnesota, and Nebraska are briefly described. Survey findings indicate that school choice legislation has had little effect on enrollment or district funding and that a slight majority favor school choice implementation. An irony is that the superintendents expressed values similar to those held by opponents of school choice, agreeing that choice is another name for educational vouchers and that it encourages recruiting. Two tables are included. (LMI)

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Superintendents Respond to School Choice

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Abstract

Superintendents Respond to School Choice

This manuscript compares the legislative initiatives being undertaken in several states to establish public school choice and reports the findings of a study of over one thousand superintendents in Minnesota, Iowa, and Arkansas regarding the impact choice is having on their schools.

Findings reported include the fact that choice is being more readily accepted in states where the policy is being phased in over several years; state segregation plans are having a limiting effect on implementation in most states; superintendents agree with opponents of choice on most points, including the arguments that students seldom transfer for educational reasons, that choice is only a disguise for the voucher system, and that it may result in a weakening of some districts, as well as the forced consolidation of a few.

Despite agreeing with these arguments, superintendents in these states, by a narrow margin, feel parents should indeed have the opportunity to exercise choice. And even, superintendents in small schools agreed, by a slight margin. Only in Arkansas, where choice is being implemented on an accelerated time frame, did small school administrators oppose choice.

Is school choice the key to improving education and demands for school restructuring? This paper argues that we are only now beginning to receive useful data on those early plans and the results warrant further study.

Superintendents Respond to School Choice

Attesting to the renewed priority education presently enjoys as a national issue, and fueled also by a Chief Executive who wants to be known by the impact of his policies on the schools, President Bush and the nation's governors convened an unprecedented education summit in Colonial Williamsburg late last year. The agenda called for the generation of a national direction for education policy.

An important idea emanating from the conference was a recommendation that children and their parents should be permitted to exercise "choice" with regard to the school district they feel best fits their needs. Reasons for this recommendation seemed to revolve around a renewed attempt to involve parents in the schooling of their children and an application of what has been the politically prevalent 1980's "free market" philosophy, a kind of educational consumerism. Advocates of choice believe that its introduction will "cause everyone in the system to examine the schools from top to bottom so that rational choices can be made. . .harmful practices, inadequate teaching and curriculum, and even inadequate physical plants can be exposed and remedied" (ASCD 1990).

Until now there have been little data available to either support or counter the efficacy of choice. Although legislation to authorize choice among districts has been examined in twenty states, it has been enacted in only five. Only Minnesota has significant experience with its

implementation statewide, and even there districts with fewer than one thousand students were not permitted to participate until this school year. With respect to the other choice states, Iowa implemented the first phase of choice during the 1989-90 school year, while Arkansas and Nebraska will implement in 1990-91. Ohio has delayed mandatory implementation until July of 1993.

The Shape of State Plans

A brief review of the varying policies in four midwestern states may clarify some of the issues regarding the state statues pertaining to choice. Table 1 contains data comparing the components in the states of Arkansas, Iowa, Minnesota, and Nebraska.

TABLE 1

Criteria	Arkansas	Iowa	Minnesota	Nebraska
Law approved	1989	1989	1985	1989
Began				
Implementation	90-91	88-89	88-89	90-91
Fully Implement	90-91	91-92	90-91	93-94
Application				
Deadline	Feb. 1	Sep.15	Jan. 1	Jan. 1
Long Term				
Commitment	None	4 yrs/ family relocation	1 yr.	only once

Three of the four states have approached implementation

in phases, with Iowa and Nebraska launching pilot programs prior to fully implementing all provisions. Minnesota limited participation in the early years to school districts with large enrollments. The states have also been very careful to observe protocol regarding the separate but related issue of racial integration. Minnesota law permits districts to establish in advance the number of majority and minority students who may transfer to or from the district. In Nebraska, first priority is given to applying students whose transfer will contribute to racial balance in both the sending and receiving districts. The Arkansas statute limits choice if the student is transferring to a district having a higher percentage of his/her race than that of the district of residence.

Statutes vary widely in the parameters they place on transferring students. While Arkansas places no limits, Minnesota requires that the transferring student not return in less than a year. Nebraska permits transfer only once, and Iowa, with minimal exceptions, requires the transferring student to make a four year commitment to remain in the district of transfer. Though school districts in all four states are essentially prohibited from denying a student permission to leave the district, they generally may elect not to receive nonresident students.

The View of School District CEO's

Results of a survey of superintendents in Arkansas, Iowa, and Minnesota conducted in March of 1990 indicate that

choice has had little impact on student enrollments nor on funding for their districts. Only one to two per cent of the students have chosen to exercise their option to transfer to another school. Loss of revenue due to choice is estimated at one to two per cent of the district budgets. On the other hand, the same number of superintendents reported gaining similar numbers of students and funding.

Proponents of parental choice generally offer four major reasons for their support. The superintendents in this study rejected all of the below:

- 1) Choice will improve parent participation;
- 2) Choice promotes competition among districts, which will improve the quality of schools;
- 3) Choice will expand educational opportunities for low- and moderate-income families; and
- 4) Choice will identify districts in need of special services.

In contrast, those who oppose choice abide by these four beliefs:

- 1) Choice is another name for school vouchers;
- 2) Choice will lead to racial segregation;
- 3) Choice encourages athletic or other activities recruiting; and
- 4) Choice will result in forced school district consolidations.

Of these four opposing arguments, superintendents agreed with the statement that choice is another name for vouchers,

as well as the one that choice encourages recruiting. The respondents were neutral in response to choice causing racial segregation and were divided on the statement relating to forced consolidations. The results are reflected in Table 2.

It is interesting to note that while a slight majority of superintendents favor state legislation permitting choice, they appear to fall into the opponents' camp when revealing their values pertaining to the issues. Additionally, nearly two-thirds of the respondents in the latest Gallup Poll of the Public's Attitudes Toward Public Schools favor parental choice (Elam, 1990). The next two to three years will most likely determine the future of parental choice, especially in the states where this option currently exists.

TABLE 2

Strongly Disagree Disagree Neutral Agree Strongly Agree

1. Choice will improve parent participation.

17 36.6 19.5 23.3 3.6

2. Choice promotes competition among districts, improving quality of schools.

19.8 32.4 16.5 28.4 2.9

3. Choice will expand educational opportunities for low- and moderate-income families.

29.1 37.9 15.4 15.4 2.2

4. Choice will identify districts in need of special services.

15.2 34.9 22.6 24.1 3.2

5. Choice is another name for school vouchers.

9.7 23.0 22.7 35.9 8.7

6. Choice will lead to racial segregation.

7.5 28.7 36.2 22.7 4.9

7. Choice encourages athletic or other activities recruiting

6.9 17.5 15.4 42.2 18.0

8. When fully implemented, choice will result in many school district consolidations.

9.1 32.0 22.2 29.5 7.2

The numbers are reported in percentages.

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